



TO YOUR HEALTH

WELCOA'S ONLINE GENERAL WELLNESS BULLETIN

Caring for Your Cognitive Health

Maintaining your cognitive health—the ability to clearly think, learn, and remember—is important for your overall well-being. As you age, it's common to experience some decline in cognitive function. That may mean occasionally losing things, forgetting words, or briefly forgetting what day it is. Or you may notice that it takes longer to learn new things. Such symptoms don't necessarily mean that you're developing Alzheimer's disease or another type of dementia.

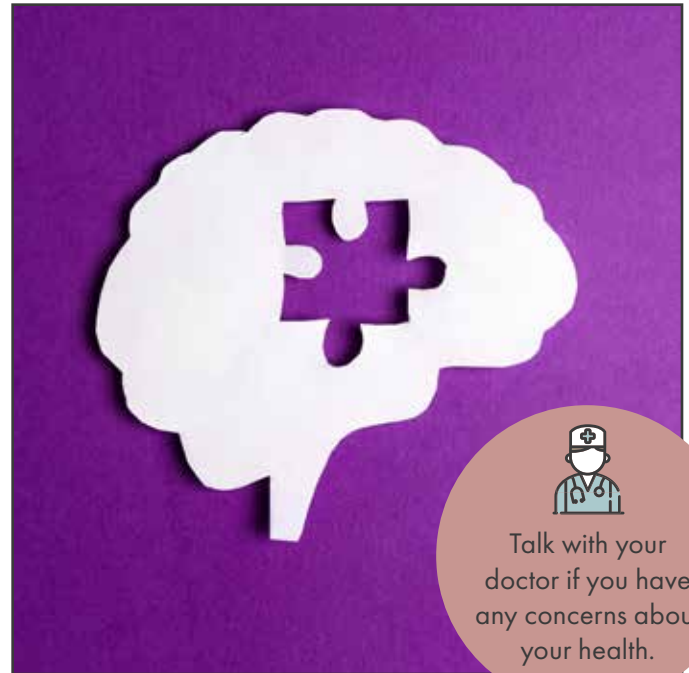
Fortunately, there are many things you can do to protect your cognitive health as you age.

COMMON CAUSES OF MEMORY LOSS

Many things can cause memory or other thinking problems. Depression, anxiety, an infection, or even certain medications can cause cognitive changes. Sometimes these types of issues can be resolved with treatment.

If you experience a sudden change in thinking, memory, or mood, it may be caused by a new medication. Some drugs may not cause cognitive changes when taken on their own but can do so when combined with other medications. Even common supplements or over-the-counter remedies can cause these types of interactions.

Sometimes, if you have more than one doctor, one might not know what the others prescribed. Experts note that older adults benefit from having a list of all their over-the-counter, herbal, and prescribed medications with them whenever they see a health care professional.



Certain medications can also have dangerous, or even deadly, effects when combined with alcohol. And alcohol alone poses risks for the older brain. It can take less alcohol to alter judgment, coordination, balance, or sleep patterns in an older adult.

Dangerous drinking habits have been rising among older adults in the U.S. A recent NIH-funded study found that 1 in 10 Americans aged 65 or older binge drinks regularly. That means drinking four or more drinks on the same occasion for women and five or more for men.

Older adults may change their drinking habits to cope with the death of a partner or other loved one, or because they're lonely. But drinking can also be part of social activities for older adults.

A recent study has used brain imaging to see how alcohol affects the brain. They found that older adults who misused alcohol had greater loss of brain tissue

compared with their peers who didn't drink. This was true even if they started misusing alcohol later in life.

The good news is that some problems with thinking or memory caused by medications or alcohol misuse can be reversed.

BUILDING BRAIN POWER

There are many things you can do to protect your brain as you age. Research shows that cognitive activity, physical activity, and social engagement are associated with better cognitive functioning in older adulthood.

Managing your health conditions is also important. Controlling your blood pressure, for example, reduces the risk of having a small stroke (bleeding from blood vessels in the brain). Small strokes can cause temporary or permanent cognitive problems.

Feeling a sense of purpose in one's life also seems to help protect older adults from cognitive decline. One recent study found that people who felt more purpose in life had fewer symptoms from brain changes linked to Alzheimer's disease.

Good overall health can help you maintain your brain health. These tips can help you stay active and healthier physically and mentally:

- » Choose healthy foods whenever possible
- » Drink plenty of water every day
- » Limit your use of alcohol
- » Don't smoke or use tobacco products
- » Get enough sleep
- » Make physical activity part of your routine
- » Keep your mind active with learning, teaching, and volunteering
- » Stay connected with loved ones, friends, and your community
- » Manage chronic health problems like diabetes, high blood pressure, and high cholesterol

